

【연구논문】

## **An Ecological Reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony***

*Jae Young Park*

(Konkuk University)

*Ceremony*, a masterpiece of Leslie Marmon Silko, deals with the healing process of its protagonist, Tayo. This character seeks his cultural identity as a Native American and strives to overcome the alienation between his tribal community and the society dominated by white people. In this healing ceremony, Silko stresses the powerful creative force of language, the memories of the traditional story, and the understanding and experience of the traditional values of the Laguna Pueblo tribe. The traditional Indian values take a serious view of the interrelatedness of nature and human beings. At the core of Silko's discourse are a comprehensive outlook on the world that refuses simple dichotomy and participation in the traditional ceremony. In this respect, Silko, like most other American Indians, "ha[s] not engaged in protest[ing] politics but rather ha[s] focused on [delivering her] own customs and traditions." As Judith Antell

maintains, “in this way [American Indians] have been able to resist colonization and genocide” (219). But if we read this story from an ecocritical perspective, *Ceremony* will not be a simple story about tribal reunion or salvation of the soul of an Indian who tried to flow with tribal tradition. Rather, it is an energetic struggle as Silko not only warns of worldwide ecological disaster but also criticizes the western capitalist ideologies and violence that caused disaster.

In *Ceremony*, Silko emphasizes ontological equality among all the members of nature, including human beings. *Ceremony* becomes an apocalyptic discourse that reveals the barren atmosphere of nature exploited by human beings. At the same time, it is an eco-critical outcry designed to bring about social and political by suggesting ecological ideology. Her ultimate purpose is to construct an ecologically sound environment where there exists neither oppression nor class domination. This is because she challenges “the domination of nature prevalent in mainstream Western society” (Smith 21). Moreover, she writes this novel under the same premise articulated by Ynestra King: “[Ecofeminism’s] challenge of social domination extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing” (20). Likewise Silko regards humanity’s oppression of nature as parallel to the colonial domination over non-European races and weaker members of society. Tayo’s post-traumatic sickness and invisibility, the self-destructive life of his war veteran fellows, the devastated land dug open for mining, and recurrent motifs of the drought are interrelated. The purpose of writing *Ceremony* is to show her belief that social justice and the

prosperity of the earth are inseparable. Joseph Meeker defines the western civilization as “the collective image of the tragic hero facing ecological disaster” and insists that “our presumed conquest over nature has brought little genuine satisfaction, for with it has come the discovery that our very existence depends upon the complexity of natural systems that were destroyed in the process” (35). Therefore, it is necessary to gain wisdom in order to convert this tragic disaster, and this wisdom can be found in the writings of Native Americans like Silko who are free from an overemphasized humanism or a sense of superiority to others.

We can approach *Ceremony* with such rhetorical issues as identity, place, or use of language. But the purpose of this paper is neither to praise the healing ceremony Tayo experiences in order to find his cultural identity nor to emphasize the tribal values of harmonious organic unity with nature. In fact, Silko denies the simple dichotomy that separates human being from nature. She wants her potential readers to take a critical view concerning the technological development and capitalism that were worshiped by the western civilization for centuries. By analyzing *Ceremony* from an ecological perspective, I will try to find the cause of the ecological disaster that contemporary civilization faces. In addition, by suggesting a life-centered ecological perspective, I will clarify that *Ceremony* is a practical and revolutionary text designed to present methods for achieving ecological justice.

*Ceremony* is a prophetic narrative that warns of the comprehensive exploitation of nature by an ecologically dark society. Carolyn Merchant, a deep ecologist and historian, explains the origin of

disaster and states, “New World colonists have undertaken a massive effort to reinvent the whole earth in the image of the Garden of Eden” (“Reinventing” 134). She also insists:

Aided by the Christian doctrine of redemption and the invention of science, technology, and capitalism, the long-term goal of the recovery project has been to turn the earth itself into a vast cultivated garden (“Reinventing” 134).

White people believed, as Merchant highlights, that “cultivation and domestication would redeem the earthly wilderness” (“Reinventing” 134). According to her, capitalism originates from a movement from desert back to garden through the transformation of undeveloped nature into a state of civility and order. Therefore, natural resources under this capitalism are valuable only when “[they] are converted by human labor into commodities to be exchanged on the market” (“Reinventing” 136). In *Ceremony*, Silko specifically criticizes this commercial capitalism that changes the natural world into a place for acquiring natural resources. She also warns of the universal ecological aftermath that will be caused by this capitalism. In the novel, one witch tells a story about the creation of white people in which so-called “the white skin people” are portrayed as troublesome humans who do not live in organic unity with the ecosystem (132-38). To their eyes, the precious life and the living force of everything are mere objects from which they can accumulate more wealth. In other words, they do not think of the universe as a web of life in which everything is interrelated.

According to the witch's story, Long time ago in the beginning, there were no white people in this world, but they came into existence looking "like the belly of a fish covered with hair" through the magic of a witch who took pride in her power (135). By juxtaposing this story, Silko tries to deconstruct discourse centered around white men and overthrows existing the center-and-margin relationship. Instead of the white-male centered western historical philosophy, she puts Indians into the center of the history. Among other things, this story has ecological significance in the fact that it describes in detail the state of nature ruined by white people. In this story, white people who were created by the Indian witch grow away from the earth, the sun, the plants, and the animals because they do not recognize the value of life in the ecosystem (135). By introducing this mythic story, Silko, as a matter of fact, tries to maintain that white people reject the life force in the nonhuman world because "they fear the world" (135).

According to the viewpoint of white people, everything on the earth is a means for increasing their profits. The witch portrays the ecological changes resulted from the devastation by white people's capitalistic greed on earth.

*Then they grow away from the earth  
then they grow away from the sun  
then they grow away from the plants and animals.  
They see no life  
When they look  
they see only objects.  
The world is a dead thing from them*

*the trees and rivers are not alive  
the mountains and stones are not alive.  
The deer and bear are objects  
They see no life (135).*

As Merchant states, “Civilization is the final end, toward which ‘wild’ nature is destined” and “to civilize [is] to bring the land out of a state of savagery and barbarism into a state of refinement and enlightenment” (“Reinventing” 147). White people conquered and tamed the nature in order to create safe place in which to nurture their capitalism. In other words, “civilization is a movement from dark, barren, virgin, undeveloped nature, or *Natura naturans*, to final Platonic, civilized, ideal form, *Natura naturata*” (“Reinventing” 149).

Silko warns us about ecological disorder and disaster, which will be caused by white people who are engrossed in civilization and development and attacks the western humanism at the same time. She cautions us through the witch’s story:

*They [white people] fear  
They fear the world.  
They destroy what they fear.  
They fear themselves.  
The wind will blow them across the ocean  
thousands of them in giant boats  
swarming like larva  
out of a crushed ant hill.  
They will carry objects  
which can shoot death  
faster than the eye can see.  
They will kill the things they fear*

*all the animals  
the people will starve.  
They will poison the water  
they will spin the water away  
and there will be drought  
the people will starve.  
They will fear what they find  
They will fear the people  
They kill what they fear.*

*Entire villages will be wiped out  
They will slaughter whole tribes. (135-36)*

As the witch describes, white people, in Ceremony, are described as exploiters or destroyers who do not stop trying to own the land, mountains, and entire nature. They are digging uranium, the source material of nuclear weapons, which can destroy the whole world. Moreover, Silko reiterates that it is white colonialists' greedy attitude and violent behavior that generated the destruction of nature after all. She attacks white people's near-sighted greed by showing various textual examples: The National Forest and the state took the remainder of Indians' land and sold it to white ranchers, while loggers relentlessly stripped the canyons, and hunters hired by the logging companies killed deer and wild turkeys for feeding entire logging camps. These hunters shot the bears and mountain lions for sport, and white ranchers fenced the land with the barbed wire and posted signs warning trespassers to keep out (185-87). Concerning this indiscreet destruction, Michael Zimmerman states that "Deep ecology explains the ecological crisis as the outcome of the

anthropocentric humanism that is central to the leading ideologies of modernity, including liberal capitalism and Marxism” (1-2). The westerner’s or capitalist’s notion is, as Helen Jaskoski asserts, “that the land is an inert commodity, and exploitable source of wealth that can be destroyed for the amusement of the destroyers” (165). In this respect, it is important to realize what Paula Gunn Allen writes, “we are the land, and the land is mother to us all” (*Sacred Hoop* 119). Humans and nature are elements of an ecosystem in which they have same ontological value. There exists an ethical relationship between nature and human beings. When this relationship is rejected it is not possible to avoid ecological crisis.

Regarding this point, in *Ceremony*, Silko explains, “the old people used to say that drought happens when people forget, when people misbehave” (46). What people forget is the fact that “the dust and the wind, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky” (46). This reflects the traditional Indian belief that such disasters as drought can happen when people forget the equivalent value of nature and human beings. Nevertheless, people have treated nature carelessly. In *Ceremony*, Tayo blames himself unconsciously for causing the draught that lasted for several years in the Indian reservation. He thinks that it has happened because he cursed the rain when he was in the Philippine jungles during the war. Tayo’s self-accusation comes from this traditional Indian belief in the relationship between nature and human beings.

Among the various traditional Indian stories in *Ceremony*, the story about Nau’ts’ity’i, the corn mother who manages the rainclouds, the plants and the grass, shows us the tragedy that can care about



through people's simple-mindedness. In this story, the twin brothers, Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'yewi, who had to take care of the mother corn alter, and "all the people were fooled by that Ck'o'yo medicine man, a'caya'nyi" (48). What draws our attention in this story is the negligence and vanity of the twin brothers. They thought they could control natural phenomena such as rain and drought. This made the corn mother, the symbol of land, angry: "So she took the plants and grass from them. No baby animals were born. She took the rainclouds with her" (48-49). People try to pacify the corn mother's rage and finally bring back the storm clouds with the help of various animals and insects. However, the last phrase, "It isn't very easy to fix up things again" (256), contains an important warning. She reiterates that further disturbance of the eco-system will bring irreversible destruction. She articulates that the organic interdependent relationship between land and people should not be neglected. By describing the closed mine and the devastated lands, Silko puts an emphasis on the terminal images of ecological destruction at the end of the novel again. However, it is more serious, as stated above, since uranium is the source mineral of the nuclear weapon. She also suggests that a nation with the powerful destructive force of capitalism and colonialism can be the principal offender of the eco-system.

In Cebolleta where Tayo takes his last test for his mental healing, Silko vividly shows the sterile land ruined by the relentless development of the U.S. Government and capitalists who took Indian lands and drilled holes in the earth:

They had enough of what they needed, and the mine was closed, but the barbed-wire fences and the guards remained until August 1945. By then they had other sources of uranium, and it was not top secret any more. Big gray vans came and hauled the machinery away. They left behind only the barbed-wire fences, the watchman's shack and the hole in the earth. Cebolleta people salvaged lumber and tin from the shack, but they had no use for the barbed wire any more; the last bony cattle wandering the dry canyons had died in choking summer duststorms. (244)

Tayo's description of the devastated nature is very much similar to what we frequently see in numerous post-apocalyptic movies portraying aftermaths of nuclear bomb explosion. Here in *Ceremony*, the nuclear bomb is the white people's capitalistic greed and violence upon the exploitation of nature.

According to Silko, "Each Pueblo group recounts stories connected with Creation, Emergence, and Migration" (*Yellow Woman* 36). One common aspect of these stories is that people, animals, and plants came out into the world from the same hole and Antelope and Badger helped bring people into the world. To Indians, the land is the benevolent motherland that gives absolute love to all living creatures including human beings. To white capitalists or colonialists, however, the land is no longer the motherland since "the new mining activities have altered the earth from a bountiful mother to a passive receptor of human rape" (*Death of Nature* 39). Silko also expresses her authorial intention by describing the deserted uranium mine. She shows the moaning land, which should have been preserved as the source of all lives. Helen Jaskoski insists that "[the mining] is a real

rape: a confiscation of the earth's life-sustaining resources for the purpose of destruction" (167). Silko effectively delivers this critical view in *Ceremony* and writes,

The gray stone was streaked with powdery yellow uranium, bright and alive as pollen; veins of sooty black formed lines with the yellow, making mountain ranges and rivers across the stone. But they [white people] had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only *they* could have dreamed. (246)

In *The Environmental Imagination*, Laurence Buell defines the late twentieth-century as a period of "environmental dystopianism" (308), and suggests three reasons for his definition:

(1) The vision of exploitation leading to "overshoot" (excessive demand on the land) or interference producing irreversible degradation, (2) the vision of a tampered-with nature recoiling against humankind in a kind of return of the repressed, and (3) the loss of all escape routes. (308)

In *Ceremony*, Silko foretells ecological crisis through the destructive force of nuclear weapons, and warns white people who think of nature only as an object for developing, possessing, and exploiting. Nature is not a passive feminine land any longer but an active life force that can react against her destroyer with such means as drought. In a broad sense, *Ceremony* is an "environmental apocalypticism" warning to human beings (Buell 308).

In conclusion, in *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko asserts that the

responsibility that goes with being human in the era of ecological disaster is to be aware of the fact that “the earth is fragile,” as Ku’oosh says in the novel. She blames the leading Western capitalist ideologies based on the concept of perpetual progress for the ecological crisis of the contemporary world. She warns the contemporary world that if humans are determined to remain as the rulers of nature, we will bring about the total destruction of the ecosystem upon which our own existence depends. She wants us to live within the cycles of nature. Silko demands a shift away from anthropocentric humanism toward an eco-centrism guided by the principle of self-realization for all members of the ecosystem.<sup>1)</sup>

Ontological equality and interdependence among the members of the ecosystem are at the core of Silko’s eco-vision, and it reflects the ancient Laguna Pueblo’s inclusive vision of the world. For her, all beings, including humans, animals, plants, minerals, wind, and water, are equal members of one family sharing in the spirit of the Creator. In the web of life, humans are neither the center of value nor self-sufficient beings. To understand “self/other as interpenetrating part/part and part/whole relationships rather than dichotomy” is

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1) The following referential works are also good to consult with regard to the arguments of the current study: Branch, Michael P. et al., eds. *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*. Moscow, ID: U of Idaho P, 1998; Orr, Lisa. “Theorizing Earth: Feminist Approaches to Nature and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18.2 (1994): 145-57; Peter Kerry Powers. *Recalling Religions: Resistance, Memory, and Cultural Revision in Ethnic Women’s Literature*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 2001; Ramsey, Jarold. *Reading the Fire: Essays in Traditional Indian Literature of the Far West*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983; Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997.

fundamental for understanding Silko's eco-community (Murphy 9). In *Ceremony*, the relationship between human and nonhuman is based on love and respect and is treated as a moral issue conditioned and restricted by ethics.

Silko also insists that the domination of nonhuman nature by man stems from the domination of human by human; therefore, in order to realize an ecological justice, we also need to bring about social justice. As most ecologist writings do, *Ceremony* encourages us to accept eco-consciousness in order to realize ecologically just societies, that is, "nonauthoritarian, nonoppressive, nonhierarchical, 'postmodern' societies in which free, playful, de-centered, heterogeneous people live in bio-regionally oriented . . . democratic, ecologically sound communities" (Zimmerman 6).

In *Ceremony*, Silko questions and destroys the authority of the shallow capitalism that focuses on material wealth and progress, and the logics of domination which have been used as a means for exploitation and oppression of people and nature. Silko once stated, "the most effective political statement I could make is in my art work [and] I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation" (*Conversations* 63). *Ceremony* is a text of resistance aiming at a gradual subversion of the corrupt white capitalist culture. What is important for her is to build dehomocentric and nondualistic cultures capable of generating "multicultural social interactions that recognize the inevitability of difference and conflict without domination or forced assimilation" (Murphy 57).

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## Abstract

### **An Ecological Reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony***

Jae Young Park  
(Konkuk University)

By analyzing Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* primarily from an ecological perspective, this study tries to find the cause of the ecological disaster that contemporary civilization faces and argues that *Ceremony* is a text of resistance aiming at a gradual subversion of the corrupt white capitalist culture. By suggesting a life-centered ecological perspective, this essay clarifies that *Ceremony* is a practical and revolutionary text designed to present methods for achieving ecological justice which was devastated by white people's commercial and capitalistic greed and violence upon nature. This essay also shows that Ontological equality and interdependence among the members of the ecosystem are at the core of Silko's eco-vision, and it reflects the ancient Laguna Pueblo's inclusive vision of the world. To understand "self/other as interpenetrating part/part and part/whole relationships rather than dichotomy" is fundamental for understanding Silko's eco-community (Murphy 9).

#### **Key Words**

Silko, *Ceremony*, Capitalism, Indian, Nature, Eco-community